

The discussion over health care reform is hugely important and has understandably dominated the conversation this month, and I am excited to have held my first telephone town hall about health care on Thursday. But I am also equally excited about another initiative that I think will be crucial to upstate New York – high speed rail.

Transportation has always been the lifeblood of New York's economy. The Erie Canal is so iconic that its songs are still taught in grade schools across the state, and the railroads of the Empire Corridor are some of the busiest in the country carrying freight for CSX.

In today's economy it can be just as important to move people as it is to move goods. Over one third of all passenger rail trips happen in New York State. By connecting Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse with high speed rail we could create a workforce of over 1.5 million people, with only an hour commute between each city. Extending the high speed rail corridor to Albany allows Western New Yorkers to reach their state government more quickly and more affordably.

We all remember when the last major increase in the price of gas drove a move towards mass transit for many commuters. We may not know when, but we do know that the price will jump again, leading many more workers to want to take trains to work rather than drive their cars. However, it takes years to build quality rail service, so it's important that we prepare now, before the supply of high speed rail falls even shorter of demand.

The environmental benefits of rail are also clear. Not only do the people riding trains save gas used by their own cars, they also relieve congestion on the road for those who do drive, reducing travel time and the amount of gas burned sitting in traffic.

And rail travel can improve one's quality of life, given that people can relax and enjoy the trip, can spend time talking with one another or doing work rather than being stuck in traffic and of course rail travel makes it possible to avoid the crushing security of airports.

On Monday, New York State is expected to announce its application for grants to improve high speed rail throughout the state.

As you may know, I've spent much of the past year working to try and secure some federal money for important projects here in New York – and especially in the upstate corridor. By creating the “Upstate Caucus” – consisting of other lawmakers from the northern part of the state – we have been able focus on the U.S. Department of Transportation and the federal railway agency and get them to look specifically at this area. From my conversations with Secretary Ray LaHood, I believe strongly that we will get a significant and important part of the federal money for these projects and help make this dream a reality.

I'm hopeful that these requests will include money to start constructing a high speed corridor between Buffalo and Albany. I'll be back on Monday to answer your questions and respond to your comments, and to announce the full list of projects for which New York State requested funding.